**Review Essay: A Deeper Understanding of Moral Standing**

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Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, *The Beam and the Mote: On Blame, Standing, and Normativity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 272 pages. ISBN: 9780197544594 (hbk.). Hardback: $90.00.

In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Tom Buchanan berates Gatsby for having an affair with Tom’s wife Daisy. Yet Tom has been unapologetically cheating on Daisy with *his* mistress, Myrtle. Even if Gatsby is blameworthy for the affair, something seems off about *Tom* condemning Gatsby, given his hypocrisy. As philosophers have put it, Tom lacks the *moral standing* to blame for infidelity. Roughly, the idea is that certain features about an individual bear on whether it is that individual’s place to blame others for certain wrongs, even if others are blameworthy.

Hypocrites who lack moral standing to blame, like Tom, are commonplace not only in literature, but in our daily lives. Yet moral standing has only recently been given the philosophical attention it deserves. Accordingly, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen’s book, *The Beam and the Mote*, comes at the perfect time. For although many of us have an intuitive grasp that blame from the Toms of the world is inappropriate, such individuals raise a variety of important questions. What exactly *is* themoral standing to blame? *When* and *why* would one lack this standing? Lippert-Rasmussen admirably tackles these questions, among others, to shed clarity on a familiar yet elusive concept. In early chapters, he explores hypocritical blame, building upon this foundation in later chapters to offer an expansive view of moral standing.

In many ways, *The Beam and the Mote* is quite broad in scope, and one can’t help but admire Lippert-Rasmussen’s vision for illuminating moral standing as the pervasive phenomenon that it is. Accordingly, we can only scratch the surface in our analysis, leaving much that is unique and worthwhile for readers to discover on their own. Our modest goal here is to help readers appreciate Lippert-Rasmussen’s book by critically engaging with some of its central ideas and arguments. Following the book’s organization, we focus on four broad topics: (1) the nature and scope of the moral standing to blame, (2) why hypocrisy undermines standing to blame, (3) what other conditions undermine standing to blame, and (4) standing in other normative domains.

**1. Theoretical Foundations of Moral Standing**

Lippert-Rasmussen endorses a conjunctive account of moral standing regarding paradigmatic blame (“blameP”): “Y has standing to blameP X for ϕ-ing if, and only if, Y has a liberty right against X to blameP for ϕ-ing *and* X has a duty to respond to Y’s blamingP X for ϕ-ing,” where X’s duty to respond is due to the exercise of a moral authority on Y’s part (p. 34). Suitable responses might involve apologizing, expressing remorse, etc. (p. 2). To put it simply, the standing to blame is a conjunction of a liberty right and a moral authority—an analysis quite similar to another prominent account in the literature.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Though blame comes in various forms, Lippert-Rasmussen restricts his account of standing to “communicative blame,” which he takes to be paradigmatic. Such blame is overtly expressed to the blamee and communicates a demand that the blamee provide a suitable response (pp. 16-17). By taking communicative blame as his starting point, Lippert-Rasmussen’s account of the standing to blame is tailored to a form of blame that issues demands, and as such it naturally requires a moral authority. This has implications for how plausibly his account can extend to other forms of blame. Some might think, for example, that Tom’s blame would also be standingless if it were instead communicated to a friend. And, even if Tom didn’t express blame to anyone, there seems something untoward about him privately (i.e., internally) blaming Gatsby for the affair.

Since private blame doesn’t communicate demands, however, the standing to privately blame cannot itself involve a moral authority. Consequently, Lippert-Rasmussen analyzes the standing to privately blame indirectly by reference to communicative expression of that blame: “private blame is standingless if, and only if, were it communicated to the blamee, the blamee would acquire no obligation to provide an uptake to the blame” (pp. 46-47). This reflects his claim that standing might apply to some non-paradigmatic forms of blame “in a derivative sense only” (p. 22).

Lippert-Rasmussen faces a more direct challenge to his priors when extending his moral authority account to third-person blame. His analysis requires that if X has the standing to express blame of Z to a third party, Y, then in so doing X generates obligations for Y to provide uptake. Such uptake standardly involves Y joining X in their blame of Z (pp. 49-50). Notice that unlike his analysis of the standing to privately blame, this analysis is not derivative; the standing to engage in third-person blame *itself* involves a moral authority. While blamers with standing may reasonably have a moral authority over blamees, Lippert-Rasmussen provides no reason to think that having the standing to blame would ever furnish one with a moral authority over *third parties*. For example, provided one's blame isn't morally faulty (e.g., it's not hypocritical), it seems that one has the liberty right to blame their coworker to their spouse. Even so, it’s difficult to see what moral authority one has over their spouse such that, in virtue of their blame, the spouse now has a pro tanto *obligation* to respond in some way (e.g., to join them in blaming their friend). One might *expect* or *hope* their spouse sympathetically responds to the blame, but this seems more a function of their relationship than of moral standing. Without an argument that standing involves a moral authority in such cases, Lippert-Rasmussen may have trouble plausibly extending his conjunctive analysis to third-person blame. This is more concerning than private blame, especially in the age of social media where an increasingly large proportion of instances of blame (and charges of hypocrisy) are directed not at the blamee but shared with a wider online audience.

Perhaps Lippert-Rasmussen could accommodate these other forms of blame by abandoning his conjunctive analysis of standing for a disjunctive one, where a moral authority isn’t required, and a liberty right alone might suffice. Or perhaps there is good motivation to restrict standing to communicative blame. Regardless, the nature of standing and its scope inform each other, and throughout the book one may find themselves wondering which theoretical question ought to be in the driver’s seat.

**2. Normative Assessments of Hypocritical Blame**

Hypocrisy like Tom’s is the classic flaw undermining standing. On Lippert-Rasmussen’s view, an individual engages in hypocritical blame when they blame someone for some fault while they believe (or should believe) that they have committed a relevantly similar fault, without blaming themselves for having done so, and without justification for their differential blaming (pp. 13-14). On this analysis, hypocritical blamers need not have actually committed a similar fault, provided they believe (or should believe) that they have.

Though there are various accounts that aim to explain why hypocritical blame is standingless, in chapter 2 Lippert-Rasmussen restricts his focus to the most prominent two. According to the moral equality account we endorse, hypocritical blamers are unfairly disposed to blame others but not themselves for similar faults, thereby implicitly rejecting the moral equality of persons. Against this, Lippert-Rasmussen defends the commitment account, according to which hypocritical blamers are insufficiently committed to the norm to which they appeal in their blame (p. 65).

Fully developing the commitment account requires explaining what the relevant understanding of ‘commitment’ is. Commitment theorists standardly endorse both a cognitive condition (e.g., belief in the relevant norm) and a non-cognitive condition (e.g., some degree of motivation to act accordingly).[[2]](#footnote-2) Beyond this, commitment theorists have had little to say. But it’s crucial that they do. After all, unless one’s blame is wholly insincere, the hypocritical blamer presumably believes that the blamee has violated a norm. Furthermore, it’s rare that someone who believes in a moral norm—even a hypocrite—is not motivated *at all* to act in accordance with it. So, what kind or degree of commitment is enough?

Lippert-Rasmussen devotes only a few sentences of the book to explicitly addressing this question. He writes, “Mere cognitive commitment is not enough… Noncognitive commitment, e.g., strong motivation to act in accordance with the principle, is needed too” (p. 67). He expands further in a footnote: “Other complex mental states and mental dispositions might also bear on commitment, e.g., the degree to which one’s long-term plans are constrained by the relevant norm. Perhaps things other than mental states narrowly construed, e.g., one’s unreflective habits, might bear on one’s level of commitment too” (p. 67, n.31). In a later chapter, he adds that “mere degree of commitment cannot be all that matters—the shape of commitment must matter too” (p. 81, n.18), though one is left wondering what the “shape” of commitment amounts to. Beyond this, readers must glean what kind of commitment is required for moral standing from cases throughout the book. This is challenging, however, and without a more explicit understanding of ‘commitment,’ it’s difficult to properly assess the view and its implications.

Setting this concern aside, should we endorse the commitment account or the moral equality account? The commitment account seems right in its diagnosis that hypocrites are (at least to some degree) lacking in seriousness about the norms they blame others for violating. And the moral equality account seems correct in its assessment that hypocritical blamers make unfair exceptions of themselves, thereby implicitly rejecting the equality of persons—something Lippert-Rasmussen acknowledges makes the account an attractive rival (p. 59).

In Lippert-Rasmussen’s assessment, the primary reason to prefer the commitment account over the equality account is due to the *hypercrite*, who blames (or is disposed to blame) themselves more severely for insignificant faults than they blame (or are disposed to blame) others for more significant faults. In Lippert-Rasmussen’s example, Adrian blames himself harshly for stealing ten dollars from a rich person, but only mildly disapproves of Beth stealing all a poor person owns. Since Adrian unjustifiably blames himself more severely than others, he thereby implicitly rejects the equality of persons, and therefore lacks the standing to blame, according to the moral equality account. But, we’re told, *surely* Adrian retains the standing to blame others for their more significant faults, so the moral equality account is incorrect (p. 60).

The hypercrite is intended to be a knockdown objection to the moral equality account, though perhaps equality theorists should simply accept that hypercrites lack standing.[[3]](#footnote-3) Even if not, however, the same objection has been turned against the commitment account.[[4]](#footnote-4) Just as the hypocritical blamer seems insufficiently committed to a norm given their relative lack of concern for their own norm violations, the hypercritical blamer seems insufficiently committed to a norm given their relative lack of concern with the even more serious norm violations of others. Lippert-Rasmussen grants that, in cases where the hypercrite’s differential blame is indicative of a lack of concern for the relevant norm, they do lack standing. He adds, however, that in most cases, the hypercrite’s failure to blame others is not due to a lack of commitment, but other reasons such as shyness or avoiding conflicts (p. 66). The same does not hold, he says, for most cases of hypocritical blame. Yet a parallel move is available for proponents of the moral equality account: insofar as the hypercrite’s blame is not due to a fundamentally unequal regard for themselves or others (but rather shyness or conflict aversion), the equality account also doesn’t imply that they lack standing.[[5]](#footnote-5) Perhaps Lippert-Rasmussen could argue that, given the proper understanding of ‘commitment,’ most hypercrites are relevantly committed and thus retain standing. And perhaps he could argue that, in contrast, most hypercrites reject the equality of persons, and thus (on our account) lack standing. Since he doesn’t argue for either claim, however, his main objection to equality accounts can (provisionally) be regarded as applying similarly to his own commitment account, and thus doesn’t constitute a reason to prefer one over the other.

An alternative approach is to show that one account has more advantages than the other. Lippert-Rasmussen lists three features of the commitment account that speak in its favor. First, it can allow for regained standing in cases where hypocrites come to be sufficiently committed to the norm. Second, it allows for weak-willed agents to retain standing even when they have violated a norm, supposing they are nevertheless serious about it. Third, it can explain undermined standing even in cases where the blamer has never violated the relevant norm, but nevertheless rejects it (p. 65). While these features may be virtues of the account, they can’t count as advantages *over* the moral equality account, since it too shares these features: those who are differentially disposed to blame can come to be disposed to blame equally, thus regaining standing; weak-willed blamers may nevertheless be equally disposed to blame themselves for their own faults, thus retaining standing; those who have never violated a particular norm may still be differentially disposed to blame with respect to it, thus lacking standing.

Whatever its advantages, the commitment account has challenges of its own. Lippert-Rasmussen discusses one that we find particularly important. Whereas one virtue of a theory concerns how well it captures our intuitions about cases, another concerns depth of explanation. If we ask what it is about hypocrisy that undermines the standing to blame, both accounts discussed here offer an answer. But we may reasonably seek a deeper explanation: why is it that the feature identified (lack of commitment or rejection of moral equality) undermines the standing to blame? Why is it that hypocritical blame is standingless, but numerous other forms of morally problematic blame (e.g., petty blame, arrogant blame) are not? Our own moral equality account provides an answer. The equality of persons grounds the fact that fundamental moral rights apply to us all equally. Since, we argue, the right or standing to blame is fundamental, it is grounded in the equality of persons. By implicitly rejecting the equality of persons, then, the hypocrite forfeits the standing to blame. Lippert-Rasmussen agrees that a deeper explanation is needed: “for the commitment account to be fully satisfying we need a rationale for why lack of commitment undermines one’s standing to blame. This question is particularly pressing because other moral relations are not undermined by lack of commitment” (p. 68). Yet he candidly admits that he has no satisfying answer to the question.

In sum, the sole purported advantage of the commitment account over the moral equality account is that only the former avoids counterintuitive implications concerning hypercrisy (though even this much is unclear). On the other hand, the moral equality account offers a greater depth of explanation. Perhaps we simply have a stalemate. What’s noteworthy here, though, is that Lippert-Rasmussen’s discussion of these two competing views doesn’t seem to significantly advance the debate between commitment theorists and equality theorists.

Hypocritical blame is not only taken to be standingless, but also pro tanto wrong. A natural assumption (which we maintain) is that whatever explains the latter explains the former. In chapter 3, Lippert-Rasmussen offers the novel contention that these two features of hypocritical blame have distinct explanations. He bases this claim on his assessment that, while the commitment account best explains why hypocritical blame is *standingless*, it fails to explain why hypocritical blame is pro tanto *wrong* (when it is). His reasons for this depend upon cases where the blame of non-hypocritical uncommitted agents is either intuitively not wrong, or at least less wrong than the blame of equally uncommitted hypocritical agents (pp. 79-83). Perhaps surprisingly, he argues that, while the moral equality account fails to explain why hypocrisy undermines standing, it’s the correct account of what makes hypocritical blame pro tanto wrong (when it is), since it captures the fact that hypocritical blame at least typically involves subordination of (and therefore disrespect for) the blamee’s perspective. More specifically, the hypocritical blamer demands uptake from the blamee while ignoring the fact that the blamee could, from their perspective, just as reasonably make the same demand of the blamer (pp. 106-108).

Along the way, Lippert-Rasmussen assesses more than a half-dozen accounts of what makes hypocritical blame wrong (sections 3.2–3.8). As he recognizes, however, many of these accounts are primarily intended by their proponents to be accounts about why hypocrisy undermines standing to blame rather than what makes hypocritical blame wrong. It would have been illuminating to see discussion of these as contenders for the best explanation of why hypocritical blame is standingless.

As equality theorists, it is unsurprising that we don’t find Lippert-Rasmussen’s arguments for the commitment account compelling, and unbiased readers may disagree. Nevertheless, a more detailed explanation of what commitment is and why lack of it undermines standing would be quite welcome, and it could go some way in motivating the importance of the distinction between hypocritical blame being standingless and it being pro tanto wrong.

**3. Further Conditions on Standing to Blame**

After building his view regarding hypocritical blame and moral standing, Lippert-Rasmussen uses various components as blueprints in the second half of the book. In chapter 4, he explores what other personal features besides hypocrisy might undermine standing to blame, contending “there is an irreducible plurality of conditions that must be met for having standing to blame” (pp. 4-5). He surveys a handful of these conditions: a blamer lacks standing when they have committed the *same fault* as the blamee (*tu quoque*), when they are *complicit* in the blamee’s wrongdoing, when the blamee’s wrong is none of the blamer’s *business*, when the blamer *lacks understanding* of the blamee’s action, and when the blamer *doesn’t accept the principle* to which they appeal in blaming. Yet he also remarks that this list is not meant to be exhaustive (p. 111).

Some of these conditions are familiar companions to hypocrisy in the literature on standing and welcome additions to Lippert-Rasmussen’s account of standing to blame. We are unconvinced, however, that tu quoque is a genuine condition on standing to blame. According to Lippert-Rasmussen, although tu quoque often overlaps with hypocrisy, it is importantly different because it does not require that the blamer believes (or should believe) they have a relevantly similar fault. Only two conditions hold: “X blamesP Y for ϕ-ing in a way that is vulnerable to the tu quoque reply if, and only if, (1) X blamesP Y for ϕ-ing; (2\*) X themself has done (or would have done) something that is both relevantly similar to ϕ-ing and also contextually relevant” (p. 113). This analysis suggests that if one has committed (or would have committed) a similar fault in the past, one’s blame is standingless via tu quoque. If that is the view, two key questions arise. First, why think the satisfaction of these conditions undermine one’s standing to blame? Second, does this lead to the unwelcome consequence that most of us lack standing to blame for many faults?

Instead of applying the commitment view to tu quoque (and other standing-undermining conditions), Lippert-Rasmussen embraces pluralism: “the commitment account of why the hypocritical blamer lacks standing to blame cannot be extended to cover all five forms of standingless blame discussed” (p. 111). Regarding tu quoque, the blamer’s moral authority is undermined simply because of their fault: “if the faults of the blamee ground a duty to respond to blame from the blamer, then so do the blamer’s faults ground a duty of the blamer to the blamee to address the blamer’s fault” (p. 114). Yet while a wrongdoer’s fault may ground a duty to apologize and make amends, it cannot *solely* be the fault that grounds the duty to respond to the blame from the blamer. Otherwise, the explanatory role of standing would fall out of the picture entirely. Even less is said for the other component of standing: “What undermines this liberty right [regarding tu quoque] is simply the fact that the blamer has a similar or worse fault themself” (p. 115).

To be sure, some blamees appear to dismiss blame simply because the blamer committed a similar wrong in the past. But we think this dismissal is unjustified. Plausibly, such dismissals arise fundamentally from a concern with the attitudes, commitments, or dispositions of the blamer—the items included in the analysis of hypocritical blame that are excluded from tu quoque. For instance, on our view, the hypocritical blamer has an unfairly differential *disposition of attitudes* that involves a rejection of the equality of persons, and which, in turn, ultimately undermines standing.[[6]](#footnote-6) Consequently, we see no compelling reason to think that tu quoque undermines standing to blame.

Additionally, tu quoque seems to have revisionary results, implying that most of us lack standing to blame for a variety of faults. After all, each of us has committed various wrongs in the past. Based on the analysis above, it seems the reformed ex-felon would lack standing to blame others for crimes she committed in the past. The matured parent who drove recklessly as a teen would lack standing to blame his child for dangerous driving. In sum, if tu quoque holds, then our tainted pasts—and not who we currently are—would severely limit our standing to blame others.

Despite his analysis of tu quoque, Lippert-Rasmussen might also resist these revisionary implications. He clarifies in a footnote that the tu quoque condition applies to a restricted scope of cases—namely, those in which one has not blamed oneself: “it would be too simple only to focus on whether the blamer at some point in their life has committed the same wrong as the blamee. Perhaps the blamer has reformed and repented, received an appropriate amount of blame, or the like, and now fully restored their standing to blame” (p. 113, n.5; see also p. 115, n.11). On this more plausible interpretation, the tu quoque condition would then be that X lacks standing to blame Y for ϕ-ing if X ϕ-ed in the past and did not blame themselves for ϕ-ing. Provided the ex-felon and matured parent blamed themselves for their past wrongs, then, they are not vulnerable to tu quoque.

Even so, the threat that standing is widely undermined remains, because one may have simply forgotten their past wrongdoing and consequently failed to blame themselves for it. Lippert-Rasmussen embraces this possibility: “The tu quoque blamer might be very serious about the norm in question, as serious as one can be—it is just that they have innocently forgotten about their own similar (or even worse) violations of that norm” (p. 114). Again, the claim that such a blamer would lack standing seems unmotivated. But even so, none of us have perfect memories, and there are likely a wide variety of wrongs we have committed in the past that we have simply forgotten about before blaming ourselves. If so, many of us would lack standing in a wide range of cases, and it’s difficult to see what one could do to regain standing. One possibility worth exploring for Lippert-Rasmussen’s view is whether a “blanket confession” or general instance of self-blame regarding all one’s past forgotten misdeeds (or misdeeds of the relevant kind) might be sufficient to restore standing.

In sum, we see problems on either of the foregoing interpretations of Lippert-Rasmussen’s tu quoque condition on standing. First, the condition lacks deeper theoretical justification. Second, if it does hold, it comes with the revisionary implication that many of us will have far less standing than we might have initially thought.

One final point is that, despite Lippert-Rasmussen’s wide canvassing of additional conditions on standing to blame, one notable omission is how these conditions work in conjunction. For instance, Lippert-Rasmussen acknowledges that dismissing blame as none of the blamer’s business suggests that “one never had the relevant standing at the outset,” yet other conditions on standing (e.g., non-hypocrisy) suggest that one *had* standing, but in virtue of some feature one has lost such standing (p. 130). This point has been pressed by skeptics of standing, as it suggests that these conditions cannot all be conditions on the same thing.[[7]](#footnote-7) In one case, standing is something *lost*, while in another, it is something *gained.* If we all have standing to blame *as a given*, but lose it when hypocritical or complicit, then it is unclear how we could make sense of the business condition, which implies that standing requires something additional (e.g., a certain relationship with others that makes blaming our business). While many hold that there are multiple conditions on standing, proponents of these conditions must also be prepared to explain how they work together—especially if they are to sway skeptics. It would have been useful to see this explanation in the book.

**4. Standing in Other Domains**

Just as Tom lacks the standing to blame Gatsby for infidelity, there also seems something inappropriate about him engaging in other forms of holding accountable. For instance, it may be inappropriate for Tom to *encourage* others to remain faithful to their partners since he does not. In the final few chapters of the book, Lippert-Rasmussen argues that standing does, in fact, apply to a variety of additional ways of holding responsible, including praise (ch. 5), forgiveness (ch. 6), apology (ch. 6), and encouragement (ch. 7). Standing even applies to non-moral blame, such as epistemic blame (ch. 7). Readers will find the final chapters familiar territory, as Lippert-Rasmussen draws on the same accounts of hypocrisy and standing to blame with a few alterations, depending on the normative domain. Just as one can fail to be sufficiently committed to the principle that undergirds one’s blame, so too one can fail to be sufficiently committed to the principle that undergirds one’s praise or encouragement. For instance, if one praises themselves for completing some small chore, but fails to praise their housemate for completing several large chores, this praise is hypocritical and therefore standingless; one does not seem sufficiently committed to the norm underlying the praise. Thus, Lippert-Rasmussen reasons, the same standing-undermining reasons apply in each domain.

While this application of commitment and standing in other domains seems straightforward on the surface, we are curious whether this straightforwardness is merely apparent. As Lippert-Rasmussen admits, he has no explanation for why lack of commitment would undermine standing to blame. Yet perhaps the reason why lack of commitment undermines standing to *blame* will not similarly explain why lack of commitment undermines standing to *praise*. This only becomes clear when there is a deeper explanation available. Compare the commitment account with the moral equality account, which does offer this deeper explanation. On the equality account, the right to blame is grounded in the moral equality of persons. By hypocritically blaming, one implicitly rejects the equality of persons. But as this equality was the grounding of one’s right to blame in the first place, one lacks the right to blame because one rejects the very thing that grounds that right. Can a similar story be told regarding praise? Perhaps. But this can be assessed on the moral equality account precisely because the account provides a deeper explanation, and thus places a requirement on what would need to be established—namely, that the right to praise is also grounded in the moral equality of persons. If it is, then hypocritical praisers reject the very ground of their right to praise, and thus lack the standing to do so. If it turned out, however, that the standing to praise was differently grounded, then the explanation would fail (the same holds for forgiveness and encouragement). But since Lippert-Rasmussen doesn’t provide a deeper explanation of why it is that lack of commitment undermines standing in any of these domains, we aren’t as well-placed to confidently assess whether the commitment account can adequately capture standing in other domains.

While we accept the possibility that standing extends into these other domains (indeed, Lippert-Rasmussen generates some compelling intuitions throughout the book), it’s an open question whether the same explanations and justifications apply to each in a parallel fashion. Showing just how wide of a net standing might cast is a valuable endeavor, and we commend Lippert-Rasmussen for pushing these boundaries. Our concern, however, is that the commitment account may appear more versatile in these other domains precisely *because* it lacks a deeper explanation for why commitment undermines standing. Perhaps once a deeper story is offered, additional theoretical commitments will restrict what the theory can do.

**5. Conclusion**

We close with two overarching assessments. The first is that, despite Lippert-Rasmussen’s defense of the view, the commitment account remains in need of further development, both in explicating its central notion and in offering a deeper explanation of why lack of commitment undermines standing. Second, regardless of our disagreements with Lippert-Rasmussen, it must be acknowledged that the book ambitiously expands discussions of standing into a variety of domains that until now were mostly or entirely unexplored. Thus, both those who share his commitments and those who do not will find much to engage with in this book, along with inspiration for further exploration of the questions it wrestles with.

Our review has been critical in nature, and our own biases will hardly have gone unnoticed. It is nevertheless our hope that our critical treatment reflects what is praiseworthy about the book and its author: the book merits the careful attention and engagement of those interested in the questions it explores, and its author deserves praise for writing the first of its kind.

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